

[The Story of Juan Gomez]

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Taken from THE [CALOOSAHATCHEE?]

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THE STORY OF JUAN GOMEZ

“Panther” John Gomez as he was called by the old timers of Lee County, was a member of the crew of the pirate ship of Gasparilla (Jose Gaspar), the pirate, at the time of his last piratical attempt in 1822, when he met his “Waterloo” and committed suicide by wrapping an anchor chain about his waist and jumping overboard, off Boca Grande Pass.

The following is a verbatim quotation from the chapter entitled, “The Last Florida Pirate” in the book [THE CALOOSAHATCHEE?], which consists of miscellaneous writings concerning the history of the Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida, compiled by Thomas A. Gonzalez. Mr. Gonzalez is the grandson of one of Lee County's first pioneer settlers, and resides in Fort Myers. (Mr. Gonzalez has died since this story was written).

“From the Fort Myers Press of June 14th, 1894, under the caption, “Old John Gomez and Wife”, we find an illustrated news story concerning the 113th birthday of a centenarian, who, in the latter part of his unusually long life confessed, that he had witnessed no less

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than 100 people walk the piratical plank, blindfolded, into eternity. According to the Press story, Gomez was born in Portugal in 1781. We went from the island of Mauritius to Bordeaux, France, at the age of twelve, and from Bordeaux, while yet very young, he went as cabin boy on a vessel sailing to the United States.

Having arrived at Charleston, S. C., and because the captain of the bark had been 'cruel' to him, he, deserted and came to St. Augustine Florida, long before the Spanish flag had ceased to wave over old 2 Fort Marion. He said that while in France he saw Napoleon Bonaparte on dress parade many times. He had been married but once and had no children. At the time of the interview with the Press representative he was living with his wife, then seventy one, on Panther Key, an outside island of the Ten Thousand group, about fifteen miles from Marco in Lee County, now Collier City, Collier County.

" 'Old John' as he was more generally known, his real name being Juan Gomez, was a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and exhibited his crucifix with pride. In physical make-up he was short, heavy set, and had a beard of heavy curly hair, which had been black but was then silvered all over. He had large, dark eyes, and bore marks of having been a handsome man. He served in the Seminole War under General Zachary Taylor and was in the battle of Lake Okeechobee which was fought December 25th, 1837. He frequently visited Fort Myers where he had many friends who were always glad to see him.

"That Juan Gomez was the oldest man in the United States at the time, was a well known fact to the citizens of Fort Myers and Lee County. He and his wife had been wards of the county for ten years, and the County commissioners on many occasions made personal investigations of him, and paid him the sum of \$8 per month , for maintenance.

"From the Press of March 10th, 1898 we learn of an incident in the life of the old man which was brought to light by J. W. Watson, a man who lived about eighteen miles from Panther Key.

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“ ‘some time ago’, the writer has said, ‘another old citizen on the Keys named Brown, made a bargain with John Gomez to build a five-room cottage for him, on condition that Gomez was to will him the island upon his death. To fully appreciate the situation, we will say 3 That John Gomez is now 117 years old, and Brown was about 65. Brown naturally expected that he would soon come into possession of the island through the death of the old man, but he reckoned without his host, for Brown passed in his checks a short time ago, and has crossed over the river to that unknown land from which none ever return. Gomez is in possession of the cottage, in good health and apparently good for a dozen more years of this life.

“The Press of July 19th, 1900, informs us of the old man's death at the age of 119. He came to his death while out fishing. In some manner he had drowned with his body hanging from the side of the boat, one foot being entangled in the fishing net on the floor of the small craft. His body was recovered several days later in a badly decomposed condition and was buried on his island. The fact that he was out on the Gulf fishing, at the time he met his death, is evidence that he was still vigorous enough to be about, though in the last few years of his life he had suffered from rheumatism.

“Let us see what Captain W. D. Collier has to say about ‘Old John’. Captain Collier is a retired sea captain who came to Fort Myers in 1870 and settled on [Marco?] Island in 1871. During a visit at his home on the night of December 15th, 1931, Captain Collier very kindly read the entire manuscript from which this chapter has been printed, and gave the assurance that it is entirely correct. He further obliged us with his own story of John Gomez, whom he knew prior to the Civil War:

“ ‘I came to Fort Myers in 1870. We took our [best?] load of lumber as far as Buckingham up the Orange River, and had intended to make our 4 home there; but the place didn't suit us and we came back to Fort Myers, from whence we moved to Marco. It was about 1876 that we learned that ‘Old John’ Gomez had located on Panther Key. We had known him at Clearwater in 1859, before the Civil War, and he was seventy-five then. Even then he was

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called 'old man' and to show that he was a sturdy man, I saw him take two bags of salt on his back up a hill. The bags weighed 200 pounds each.

" 'When the Civil War came we lost track of him until we settled at Marco. In his later years he came to our store about once per month and we supplied him with groceries, which were paid for by the county. He told me that he was a pirate, and that he personally had walked a number of people over the plank to death and had witnessed at least a hundred others.

" 'He once told me of an escape he made from Cuba before the Civil War in the States. He had been to Cuba with a filibustering expedition, and when in the vicinity of Morro Castle the [government?] soldiers gave chase, he managed to escape by hiding under the seat of one of the fishing boats which had been pulled up on the shore. When the soldiers search had proven futile and the last man had disappeared, he paddled to sea with a board. After drifting for three days, without food, he was picked up by a schooner going to Key West. He never left Florida after that.'

"The following article from Mr. Foster's Travel Magazine of January, 1928, gives an accurate account of the 119-year-old pirate, which, besides being a truthful and accurate report of the old man, had been interestingly written. It is from this article that we get 5 the caption, 'the Last Pirate'. The writer's name, we regret to say, was not given.

" 'Among the pirates who in the early years of the last century terrorized the West Indian and Florida [seas?] one of the most notorious and infamous was Gasparilla, whose exploits are recalled in Tampa's annual carnival under direction of Gasparilla's [Krewe?]. Mr. Robert S. Bradley, president of the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railroad, who has written the story of Gasparilla's career, tells us that he was a Spaniard, Jose [Gaspar?], who stood high in favor at court, stole the crown jewels, and when detected deserted his wife and children, collected a band of devils of the same kidney, and betook himself to the high seas and piracy. Associated with Gasparilla during his piratical career was

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his brother-in-law, John Gomez, a Portugese, born on the island of Mauritius in 1781. Establishing a base at Boca Gande Key and Gasparilla Island on the Gulf Coast, Gaspar soon became famed and feared for his forays on Spanish and American shipping. One of his early exploits was the capture of the Philadelphia ship Orleans and confiscation of \$40,000 cargo. On this occasion in a letter to an officer of the American Navy, he wrote that the pirate's maxim was that 'the goods of this world belong to the strong and the valiant', and in the long series of atrocities which followed, he gave the creed practical exemplification.

“ ‘But as we are now concerned with John Gomez and not with his chief, we may dismiss Gasparilla by recording that putting into practice his maxim that the goods of the world belong to those who are strong enough to take them, he amassed a store of great wealth, and before retiring to enjoy it came to a pirate's proper end. In the 6 In the spring of 1822, Mr. Bradley tells us. While getting together his treasure for division which at that time was hidden in six separate hiding places, he sighted what appeared to be a large English merchantman off Boca Grande Pass. It is said his greedy eyes lit with pleasure at the thoughts of just one more victim ere his piratical days were over. Closely following the shore line of the Gulf, he slipped into Charlotte Harbor through what is now Little Gasparilla Pass, crept around Gasparilla Island, and gathered together his crew. Great excitement reigned when the plans were unfolded. The band of eighty men were divided into two parts, he commanding thirty-five men, LaFitte thirty-five, while ten were left in charge of the camp. At about 4 in the afternoon Gasparilla and his men dashed through Boca Grande Pass for the English prize. Fast overtaking the fleeing ship, the black flag was hoisted and his men stood ready with the grappling hooks. But suddenly the English flag floated down and the Stars and Stripes were pulled in place. In a moment guns were uncovered on deck, and Gasparilla. realizing that he was in a trap, turned to flee. His boat disabled by shots from the war vessel and capture staring him in the face, he wrapped a piece of anchor chain about his waist and jumped into the sea. His age at his death was about sixty-five.

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“ ‘so then and there Gasparilla the pirate, cheating the hemp and taking himself out of the world for the world's good, sank to the bottom of the sea. Of his crew most were hanged; the ten men who had been left to guard the camp escaped.

“ ‘Among those who saved themselves was John Gomez, now about forty-one years old. Of his fortunes immediately following the 7 tragedy of Boca Grande Pass there is no record. It is not known whether he enlisted under the Jolly Roger of some other leader and followed his calling for ten years that still remained before the American Navy cleared the seas of pirate craft, or whether sickened by the drowning of his chief he renounced the black flag and took to the simple life. However, it may have been at this point John Gomez the Florida pirate passed from the scene. When he reappears it is to be long, long afterward, in a different guise and in a different Florida, a Florida which takes no thought of pirates save as the bold, bad men of a far-off past.

“ ‘In 1889, prompted by a newspaper report of the death of a Fernandina negro whose age was estimated as 130 years, Charles Kendall, of Tarpon Springs, wrote in the Forest and Stream[:?]

“ “On Panther Leon Island, seven miles from Cape Romano, lives an old man, John Gomez. I met him first some three years ago, when he was over one hundred years old. On my canoe cruise around the cape last year I called there and had a long conversation with him. He told me he was born on the Island of Mauritius, and that his parents moved to Bordeaux, where he lived until 1814 or 1815, when he came to the United States. He followed the sea around Florida and the West Indies until the First Seminole War, when he joined the forces under Col. Taylor, and served through the war.

“ “He told of an experience he had on the Caloosahatchee. Col. Taylor arrived at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee with troops and provisions. Col. Smith was in charge of Fort [Denaud?] up the river. Col. Taylor sent Gomez with a letter to Col. Smith for boats to carry stores up the river. Gomez missed his way and wandered through the 8 woods five weeks,

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subsisting on roots and berries. Once he saw what he took to be a mule lying by the side of a large log. Gomez thought, 'Here is my chance; I'll creep up and catch him, and he'll carry me somewhere where I can get something to eat.' He said, 'I started to crawl up as close as possible to make a rush and catch him. When I got within a rod or so - Boof! Up jumped a big black bear, and as he tore away through the woods my heart fell again.'

“ “On the last day he went staggering through the bush, regardless of whether there were Indians or not. Near night he came in sight of a man carrying a gun. 'For God's sake don't shoot; I'm hungry,' staggered forward and fell in a faint. He knew no more until he found himself in Fort Thompson, where all care and kindness were shown to bring him back from death's door. As he had an excellent constitution he soon recovered and was in active service again.' ”

“ “His experience during the Civil War would fill a book. He was on the West Coast, dodging the blockaders, running cotton out and provisions in, always with small craft that could work through the island channels and among the keys. ”

“ ‘the old man is bright and active, and makes his own living by fishing. He has a wife much younger than himself, perhaps fifty years old, but the old man is the smarter of the two. On the morning I left the island he was going off fishing, and remarked that he would like a boy to go with him. His wife said, 'Why don't you take Clement?' Clement was a man living on an island, and was apparently thirty or forty years of age. 'Oh!' said John, 'He's too slow.' ”

“ ‘the old man has a little garden on the island and raises a few 9 vegetables, but his main dependence is the water, and what it brings him. Fish, turtle and turtle eggs, with a little coffee, sugar and meal, make / up the sum of their subsistence. ”

“ ‘It looked like a lonely, sad life, but I don't know that in all my wanderings I ever saw a happier couple than old John Gomez and his wife on Panther [?].’ ”

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"Mr. Kendall's surmise that life on Panther Key was lonely for the woman there was confirmed five years later by a correspondent of *Forest and Stream*, who, in the course of a cruise on the West Coast, had called at the island:

" 'the captain told us not far away was an island where a man lived who was 114 years old, had known Napoleon, and was wonderfully interesting. His wife was old, but he did not know her age. They lived entirely alone on this island, twenty miles from anybody; and the captain could sail us near and anchor for the night. We reached there at 4 p.m., and immediately rowed over.

" 'the old lady came down to the beach to meet us, exclaiming, 'I am glad, oh, I am glad, to see you,' and invited us to the house. This was a very crude affair, with two small rooms, without plaster or paint, but very comfortable when compared with the 'shack' house she had lived in until a few months previous to our visit. To our great regret when we asked where her husband was, she said, 'Oh, my old man, he's gone Tar-a-pin (meaning terrapin) fishing. He's got tar-a-pin on the brain, my old man has.'

" 'soon after we were seated she brought in a plate filled it with bananas which she passed insisting on each taking one. She said she always ' liked to treat folks nice ' that came to see her.

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Upon thanking her, her reply was, 'You are welcome ma'm, indeed, you are welcome.' I could not but think this true hospitality. When I asked her if she lived entirely alone when her husband was away, she said, 'All but the chickens; they are mighty lot of company daytimes, but they go to bed right early; then I ain't got nobody.' When I asked her how she managed to get enough to eat she told me she had plenty clams, oysters, fish, etc. 'do you ever make chowder?' I asked. 'Yes, ma'm.' 'How do you make it?' 'Well, ma'm, I take a little pork, slice it, and put it in the kettle with the clams and water; sliced potatoes, if I have them. Onions is good in chowder; put in some if I've got 'em. Tomato is mighty nice;

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don't have that much, though. I like black pepper, too; always put it in if I've got it.' 'But', I said, 'mrs. Gomez, how do you make chowder without these things?' 'Why, leave 'em out.' 'I imagine her chowder consists many times of pork, clams and water.

" 'she walked a long way on the beach with us / on our way to our boats, her figure outlined against the sky, and the wind blowing her scanty garments about her. It was a picture of desolation, and affected us deeply. After we were back, it occurred to us, why did we not ask her over to eat supper? Every man was on his feet instantly, saying, 'I'll go and fetch her over.' She seemed so happy and delighted! At the table one gentleman was talking to me about how lonely it must be for them, and remarked. 'But I suppose they don't mind it; they get used to it.' I did not know how she had heard the remark, but she made answer: 'Never do get used to it, sir.' When it came time for her to go home, she wanted to stay longer; said she didn't feel in any 11 hurry, if we didn't.

" 'the next morning as we sailed away, we saw her standing watching us, and as long we could see her through our glass her eyes were seaward. Somehow we felt we were breaking the link between her and civilization. We have wondered many times if her old man ever came back. He has a little old boat with a rag sail, and he goes out miles in the Gulf all alone. I think with her, 'He's getting too old to go by himself.' She said 'he'd had kind of queer spells, and she had to give him a heap of Jamaica ginger to rouse him up.' We talked about what will become of them when one dies[md;]with not a soul within twenty miles[md;]and we all echoed the thought, 'Oh, solitude, where are thy charms?'

"Revisiting Panther Key in 1893, Kendall found John Gomez hale and hearty. ' The old man goes fishing, turtling, a-gaitering, and does much work that would puzzle a younger man. The day before we came he had gone out and got four large turtles, putting them in the boat alone and then pulling home, some seven or eight miles. He was as full of stories as an egg is of meat, and it is a treat to hear him tell of his adventures in the days long past. ***** '

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“But in all that Kendall wrote no reference is found to the men and events of the Gasparilla years, though one might think that these must have been uppermost in the ex-pirate's recollection. Indeed, he was given to recalling these times, for Mr. Bradley wrote that his Gasparilla sketch was compiled for the most part from incidents told by John Gomez. With the very old, memory goes back to early days, and John Gomez in his later life on Panther Key, with dimming memory of the intervening years, must have lived over again more and more vividly the exciting scenes of his pirate days. In 1900, the year of his death, two census takers stopped at Panther Key and spent the night. ‘the race of the old buccaneer was almost run,’ wrote Mr. Bradley, ‘but all through that night he told a story of piracy that could scarce be believed, yet it was a dying man that was clearing his soul before his Maker. He told of the looting of ships, the massacre of innocents, and last of all, when his life was nearly passed, he told the story of ‘the Little Spanish Princess’, whose name he did not remember. He told where the body would be found, and a sketch was prepared under his direction, and in recent years in the exact location as described, the skeleton of a beheaded woman was found’. This is the story:

“ ‘In the early days of the year 1801 a princess of Spain sailed in great state for Mexico. While in that country she entertained its ruler, and to show her appreciation of the Mexican people she prevailed upon the nobles to allow her to take eleven of Mexico's fairest daughters away with her to be educated in Spanish customs. A treasure of much gold, bound in chests of copper, it is said, was in the cargo. When about forty miles from what is now Boca Grande, [Gasparilla?] engaged them in combat, killed the crew, took the gold, and carried away as captives the princess and the eleven Mexican girls. The princess he kept for himself; the maids here divided among his men. The little Spanish princess spurned the one-time favorite of the king, and Gasparilla swore that if she did not return of her own free will the affections / lavished upon her, she would be beheaded, and as the story goes the threat of Gaspar was fulfilled. Far away from her native land, alone on a tropical isle, the little princess still lies in the lonely bed made for her by Gasparilla.’”

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Following is a poem by the poet, Lynn Russell, who is well known in Florida and is listed in Who's Who:

THE LITTLE SPANISH PRINCESS The phantom ships of pirate fleets Still sail the Spanish main And up the coast of Florida Bold Gaspar glides again. And sometimes on the darkest nights The Gulf winds whisper tales Of Gasparilla's savage crew That rode the white-capped trails In search of ships that carried wealth In merchandise or gold[md;] Of buccaneers whose bloody deeds Have made the blood run cold. Among these tales is one proved true, Worth telling once again, About the Spanish Princess of The royal House of Spain. In eighteen hundred one she left Each happy girlhood scene And in great state sailed westward on An errand for the queen. She safely reached far Mexico, Was there received in state, The ruler gave her priceless gems And gold and silver plate. At last her stay came to an end And she set sail again To go back to her native land Of far-off sunny Spain. Eleven of the fairest girls Of noble [parentage?] Embarked with her upon the ship To dare the ocean's rage.

Tampa, Florida

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Corinne White Lamme

The Story of Juan Gomez It was a happy group set out Upon that fated day, A grim, portentous wind that blew Them swiftly on their way. And soon they neard neared the western coast Of Florida's green strand; But wait [md;] there comes a flying ship [md;] Proud Gaspar with his band

Of cruel buccaneers! see how

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The Jolly Roger's flag

Floats boldly from the [mast?]. Quick, flee,

There is no time to lag.

It is too late, the pirates swoop

Like buzzards to their prey.

And Gasparilla's cut-throat band

Are victors of the fray.

The captured men are killed or made

To walk the plank and fall

Into the deep where death has found

A nameless grave for all.

The haughty maidens who had yearned

To learn the ways of Spain

Are now the prize of cruel men[md;]

Ah, better were they slain.

Although the little Princess knew

That she might never see

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Her lover waiting in Madrid
Beneath the trysting tree,
Yet boldly she defied the whole
Of Gaspar's passionate charms
And prayed for death to come and free Her from the pirate's arms.
At last his rage could stand no more
And Gasparilla slow
The maiden who had scorned his love
For one /whose heart was true.
Today the little Princess lies
Within a lonely grave
That Gasparilla made for her
Because her soul was brave.
She sleeps where night birds sweep across
A semi-tropic isle
Where Gaspar made her final bed
Because she scorned his smile.

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-Lynn Russell